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# GRAY'S ELEGY

· AND ITS AUTHOR







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"Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap."



# GRAY'S ELEGY AND ITS AUTHOR

*Gray's Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*

*with an Introduction and Illustrations from Original Photographs by*

DR. J. L. WILLIAMS

TROY NEW YORK

NIMS AND KNIGHT

1891

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# ILLUSTRATIONS.

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## INTRODUCTION.

GRAY'S ELEGY is probably the most widely known classic in the English language. It has been translated into almost every civilized tongue, and is one of the few masterpieces which seem to appeal alike to the simple-minded peasant and the profound student of literature. It has endured without loss of dignity the most severe test which can be applied to any literary production—that of popular familiarity, and it ranks with Shakespeare's best work in retaining its vitality and its hold upon cultivated taste through all the changing fashions of the century and a half which have elapsed since it was written.

The secret of its fame is to be found in the simplicity and elegance of its diction, the truthfulness of its pictures, and its appeal to those tender and noble feelings of the human heart, which are as universal as love and death.

The work of all men may be said to be the result of certain capacities and tendencies, which are inherited, plus all of the external conditions of life from the time of birth. (It is not often, however, that the connection, or relation, between the work and the antecedents and conditions which have produced it can be so clearly traced as in the instance of the *Elegy* and the life of Gray.) A little study of his life enables us to see that the poem was as naturally the product of the poet's mind, as is the fruit that of the tree upon which it grows.

The object of the present work is to give a brief resumé of the life of Gray, and to illustrate the *Elegy* by views which are exact reproductions of studies from life, made amidst the scenes which the poet has so vividly and truthfully described. Some of these are known to be the identical places which he had in mind, as for instance, all of the views of Stoke Pogis Church and the old churchyard surrounding it, and also the "nodding beech" by the brookside, which is still known as "Gray's beech." Eton College and Windsor Castle are just what they were in the poet's time. The other views are from studies made in the immediate vicinity, and so slowly are changes effected in rural England, either in the topography of the country or in the homes and habits of the people, that these illustrations probably very faithfully represent, for the first time, the scenes and life amidst which Gray wrote his immortal work, nearly one hundred and fifty years ago.

An hour's ride from London, on the Great Western Line, brings us to Slough, the nearest station to Stoke Pogis, where we change the narrow, stuffy compartment of the English railway carriage for that most delightful of all modes of travel, the top of an old-fashioned, four-horse English coach. We are whirled away over a narrow, smooth road, which runs between hawthorn hedges and rows of stately elms, and stretching away on either side are the waving cornfields and rich meadow lands of the valley of the Thames. There is something in this profusion of pastoral beauty which appeals to every sense. The gentle breezes caress us softly and bring to our nostrils the mingled perfumes of wild flowers and new-mown hay; the strident clanging sound of the mowers whetting their scythes comes across the meadows; high above us the lark sends down his joyous melody, that seems to fall a rippling stream of music from the clouds; a yellowish hue is creeping over the fields of ripening grain, which are bordered and intermingled with long stretches of the scarlet poppy—a true symbol of a land which has grown opulent in refined pastoral beauty through centuries of careful cultivation. And over all there broods that ineffable, indescribable sense of peace which makes England the most restful country in the world to travel in.



Eton College





The three or four miles are all too swiftly passed over, and our coach stops at a little country inn just on the outskirts of what was once a part of old Windsor forest, and known the world over now as the famous "Burnham Beeches." These venerable trees are said to be seven or eight hundred years old, and they have probably changed but little since Gray, "far from the madding crowd," wandered among them and dreamed himself into that spirit of serene content which he seems to have found in their sylvan solitudes. One of these old giants, with wide-spreading branches and moss-covered boles that reach out towards the little brook that murmurs near, is pointed out as the identical "nodding beech that wreathes its old fantastic roots so high." Here are the miniature precipices of which he wrote to Walpole, and the little lakes in which are mirrored the beautiful silver birches that lean out over the banks. The region is one of the happy hunting grounds of London artists, and it would be difficult to find an attractive spot which has not been transferred to canvas and exhibited on the walls of the Royal Academy. Fortunate will be the possessor of a beautiful picture which the writer saw there in the season of '89. The view was the pathway beside the middle lake, with the King of the beeches on the left, and seated on one of the fantastic boles of this aged monarch was a beautiful girl, her lap filled with wild flowers, while at her feet sits the poet. It was a moment in that first happy Summer of his one love dream. From this point an old pathway leads out of the woods toward the "upland lawn" of Burnham Common, where the "hoary-headed swain" had oft

"Seen him at the peep of dawn  
Brushing, with hasty steps, the dews away."

This is probably the footpath most frequented by Gray, as it leads directly from his home into the forest.

We follow its winding way for a mile or more across the fields and over many stiles, past cottages embowered in rose-vines, through the open doors of which we may watch the "busy housewife ply her evening care" until at last we catch a glimpse through the great elms of the "ivy-mantled tower" of Stoke Pogis church. An ornamental oak gateway, a little too new to be in keeping with the crumbling moss-grown stones, but withal more picturesque than such modern improvements are wont to be, admits us to the churchyard. No words can portray the scene as perfectly as do the lines of the Elegy itself. How perfectly the expression, "where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap" describes these rows of ancient graves. Here are the "rugged elms" with the rooks mildly cawing about their softly waving tops; and over them, just in front of the picturesque

old church porch, an ancient “yew trees shade” falls athwart that last resting place where a group of “The rude fore-fathers of the hamlet sleep.” On the south wall of the church is a tablet calling attention to the tomb, a few feet away, in which Gray was buried, in the same vault where his beloved mother was laid. The only inscription on the tomb is the sweetly pathetic one which the poet wrote :

“Beside her friend and sister,  
Here sleep the remains of  
Dorothy Gray,  
Widow; the careful, tender mother  
Of many children ; one of whom alone  
Had the misfortune to survive her.”

Aside from the little tablet on the wall there is nothing to mark the place of Gray's interment. But in the field, a few rods south of the church, there rises a huge, ugly mausoleum, designed by James Wyatt, R. A., and erected in 1799. It is covered with inscriptions of selections taken from the “Elegy” and the “Eton Ode.”

“The glimmering landscape” is fading into the purple glow of evening, the laborers are trudging homeward to “sweet repast and calm repose,”—let us sit here on the bench in the old church porch while the biographer tells us something of the life of one of the most sincere and gentle natures in the records of literature.

Thomas Gray was born in London, on the 26th of December, 1716. But little is known of his ancestry beyond the fact that his paternal grandfather was a successful merchant who died, leaving Philip Gray, the poet's father, a snug little fortune of 10,000 pounds.

Philip Gray was married about the year 1705 to Miss Dorothy Antrobus. Although belonging to a genteel family, Miss Antrobus, at the time of her marriage, was keeping a milliner's shop in London, in company with her sister Mary. This fact is worthy of mention, because from this little business, which was conducted by his mother and aunt, came the funds for the payment of his educational expenses, while at Eton and Cambridge. For although Philip Gray had inherited what in those days was a very considerable fortune, and although apparently successful in business himself, as a money scrivener, we have the written testimony of Mrs. Gray that she had never received a single penny from her husband from the time of their marriage, either for the support of herself or the education of their son.

The married life of Dorothy Gray was probably anything but a happy one. Her husband was miserly, jealous, violent, and probably lived always on the verge of insanity. Thomas was the only one of her twelve children whom she succeeded in rearing, and it is thought he would have died in a fit, but that she opened a vein in his arm with her scissors, in a moment of desperation, and thus saved his life. The otherwise dark picture of the domestic life of the Gray family is beautifully relieved by one bright spot—the touching affection which always existed between the poet and his mother. She was steadfastly devoted to him, and he returned her affection loyally throughout her life, and after her death his tender memories of her love found the pathetic expression which is inscribed on her tombstone.

Dorothy Gray had two brothers, John and Robert Antrobus, who were Fellows of Cambridge College. Thomas was probably not more than seven or eight years of age when his Uncle Robert took him away from the miserable home life at Cornhill, London, to his own house at Burnham, near the scene which he was afterwards to immortalize in his “ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD.”

It is said that the boy acquired a very thorough knowledge of botany from his uncle, during the two or three years of his life here in the country, before he entered Eton.

At ten years of age, his father having refused to have anything to do with his education, he was sent to Eton, under the auspices of his uncles, his mother assuming all the financial responsibility. Something of the poet's fastidious taste in the selection of his associates, as exhibited in later years, was shown here soon after he entered school. He formed friendships with Horace Walpole, Richard West, who was a very precocious lad, Jacob Bryant, the antiquary, and others who became men of more or less note. With these Gray shared such dilettanti sports as were then in vogue, and it was the recollection of these which prompted the stanza in the famous Eton Ode :

“Say, Father Thames, for thou hast seen  
Full many a sprightly race  
Disporting on thy margent green,  
The paths of pleasure trace ;  
Who foremost now delights to cleave,  
With pliant arm thy glassy wave?  
The captive linnet which enthrall?  
What idle progeny succeed  
To chase the rolling circles' speed  
Or urge the flying ball ?”

As a boy, Gray was studious, reserved and shy, and that sweet melancholy which seems to have been the dominating feature of his life developed at an early age. We find him moralizing in Latin verse and endeavoring to fathom the secret laws of nature while still a school boy. However, he had hardly yet commenced to feel much of that "world sorrow" which afterwards seemed to take possession of him ; and altogether his life here was perhaps the happiest that he ever knew. His poetic fancies turned to these fond memories in after life and found expression in the lines :

"Ye distant spires, ye antique towers,  
That crown the wat'ry glade,  
Where grateful Science still adores  
Her Henry's holy shade ;  
And ye, that from the stately brow  
Of Windsor's heights—the expanse below  
Of grove, of lawn, of mead survey,  
Whose turf, whose shade, whose flowers among  
Wanders the hoary Thames along  
His silver-winding way :  
Ah, happy hills ! Ah, pleasing shade !  
Ah, fields beloved in vain !  
Where once my careless childhood stray'd,  
A stranger yet to pain !  
I feel the gales that from ye blow  
A momentary bliss bestow,  
As waving fresh their gladsome wing,  
My weary soul they seem to soothe,  
And, redolent of joy and youth,  
To breathe a second spring."

Gray left Eton in 1734, and went to Cambridge.

If one were to judge from his letters to West, his life here was one of idle melancholy. He says: "Almost all the employment of my hours may be best explained by negatives ; take my word and experience upon it, doing nothing is a most amusing business ; and yet neither something nor nothing gives me any pleasure." But this was more an expression of a sort of fashionable ennui than a statement of fact. Melancholy he was, without doubt, but idle he certainly was not. He was laying the foundation of a scholarship which placed him in the very







Burnham Beeches.

front rank of the learned men of his time. In August, 1736, and also the following year, we find him again at his uncle's house in Burnham, spending his vacations. During this latter visit he writes a letter to Horace Walpole, in which he mentions the now world-famous Burnham Beeches. He says : "I have at the distance of half a mile, through a green lane, a forest (the vulgar call it a common), all my own, at least as good as so, for I spy no human thing in it but myself. It is a little chaos of mountains and precipices ; mountains, it is true, that do not ascend much above the clouds, nor are the declivities quite so amazing as Dover Cliff ; but just such hills as people who love their necks as well as I do, may venture to climb, and crags that give the eye as much pleasure as if they were more dangerous. Both vale and hill are covered with most venerable beeches, and other very reverend vegetables, that, like most other ancient people, are always dreaming out their old stories to the winds. At the foot of one of these squats *Me (il penseroso)*, and there I grow to the trunk for a whole morning. The timorous hare and sportive squirrel gambol around me like Adam in Paradise, before he had an Eve ; but I think he did not use to read Virgil as I commonly do."

Gray left Cambridge in September, 1738, and went to his home in London. Early the following year he was invited by Walpole to accompany him on a grand tour on the Continent. He seems to have had a very gay time in Paris, and the following extract from a letter to his mother shows him in a somewhat different mood from the pensive, serious student at Cambridge : "The other evening we happened to be got together in a company of eighteen people, men and women of the best fashion here, at a garden in the town, to walk, when one of the ladies bethought herself of asking, 'Why should we not sup here?' Immediately the cloth was laid by the side of a fountain under the trees, and a very elegant supper was served up ; after which another said, 'Come, let us sing,' and directly began, herself. From singing we insensibly fell to dancing, and singing in a round, when somebody mentioned the violin, and immediately a company of them was ordered ; minuets were began in the open air, and then came country dances, which held till four o'clock the next morning ; at which hour the gayest lady then proposed that such as were weary should get into their coaches and the rest of them should dance before them with the music in the van, and in this manner we paraded through all the principal streets of the city and waked everybody in it."

There is nothing in this of the brooding melancholy or the habitual "low spirits" which were, as he wrote while at college, his "true and faithful companions."

Here is a gem of a conceit which he writes from Lyons anent the meeting of the rivers : “The Rhone and Saone are two people, who, though of tempers expressly unlike, think fit to join hands here, and make a little party to travel to the Mediterranean in company ; the lady comes gliding along through the fruitful plains of Burgundy, *incredibile lenitate, ita ut oculis in utram partem fluit judicare non possit* ; the gentleman runs, all rough and roaring, down from the mountains of Switzerland to meet her, and with all her soft airs, she likes him never the worse ; she goes through the middle of the city in state, and he passes *incognito* without the walls, but waits for her a little below.”

( At Reggio, in Italy, occurred the famous quarrel between Gray and Walpole.) The breach was healed, after an estrangement of three years ; and after Gray’s death, Walpole acknowledged that the fault was largely his own. The poet returned from Italy in the autumn of 1741, and a few weeks later occurred the death of his father. He continued to live with his mother and aunt for nearly a year, at Cornhill, until the death of his uncle, Mr. Jonathan Rogers, who lived at Stoke Pogis, near Burnham, where he had spent two years as a boy. Mrs. Gray and her sister, Mary Antrobus, then decided to dispose of their shop and with the proceeds of this sale and with the small remnant of the fortune which Philip Gray had left, they went to live with their widowed sister, Anna, at Stoke Pogis. Gray had preceded them and was living there at the time of the death of his uncle. Several events occurred in the summer and autumn of 1742, which doubtless prepared his mind for the commencement of that wonderful poem which was to bring deathless fame to its author. One of them was the loss of his dear friend West, to whom he was so fondly attached that the mention of his death many years afterwards always visibly agitated him.

He had already written, in August of this year, the “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” or, as the title reads in the original manuscript, “Eton College, Windsor, and the Adjacent Country.” A short walk from Stoke Church toward the west, brings us to the summit of a gentle acclivity, which slopes away for a couple of miles to the Thames. Rising majestically from a promontory on the opposite bank of the river, we see the embattled outlines of the Royal Castle of Windsor, relieved against the southern sky. A little lower down in the valley, on the opposite side of the river from the Castle, we can see the “distant spires” and “antique towers” of Eton College. Mr. Edmund Gosse, in his admirable life of Gray, says : “The Eton Ode is redolent of Stoke Pogis, and to have sauntered where Gray must himself have muttered his verses as they took shape, gives the reader a certain sense of confidence in the poet’s sincerity.”





Windoor Castle



A few months later, probably in October or November, 1742, he commenced the 'Elegy.' It became apparent to Gray, soon after the removal of his mother and aunt to Stoke, that he would be compelled to abandon the sweet serenity of a life of lettered ease here in the country, which he had pictured to himself. The financial income of the family was hardly more than sufficient, even with rigid economy, for the support of the three sisters. He made an attempt to secure a Government appointment, but failing in this, he resolved to return to Cambridge. Accordingly, he took his bachelor's degree of Civil Law in the Winter of 1742, and immediately took up his residence at the college. His life from this time on was spent almost entirely between Cambridge and Stoke Pogis. In November, 1749, Gray's aunt, Mary Antrobus, died at Stoke. He was very much attached to her, and her death seems again to have called his attention to the unfinished Elegy. He finished it the following June, at Stoke, where it was begun, amid the scenes which it describes. On its completion he immediately wrote to Walpole, saying: 'Having put an end to a thing whose beginning you have seen long ago, I immediately send it to you. You will, I hope, look upon it in the light of a thing with an end to it; a merit that most of my writings have wanted, and are likely to want.'

The only circulation this masterpiece of lyric poetry had for nine years was such as Gray's friends gave it, by copies in manuscript form. He received a letter in February, 1751, from the publisher of a London magazine, informing him that this ingenious poem called "Reflections in a Country Churchyard" was about to appear in his periodical, and asking for his correspondence on the subject. Ignoring this audacious request, Gray immediately wrote to Walpole, asking him to have the Elegy published within a week, if possible. It was placed in the hands of Dodsley, and the first printed edition of the poem appeared within five days from the receipt of Gray's letter. It was a complete popular success, from the instant of its publication. Four editions appeared the first two months, and eleven authorized editions were printed within two years. It was pirated and printed everywhere, and read by everybody. Some of the earlier editions contain several beautiful stanzas which were subsequently omitted by the author. One of these formed the fourth stanza of the Elegy, and reads as follows:

"Hark! how the sacred calm that breathes around  
Bids every fierce, tumultuous passion cease;  
In still, small accents whispering from the ground  
A grateful earnest of eternal peace."

These lines are, perhaps, as beautiful as any in the poem. They were rejected because the ideas were transferred and worked up in other parts of the *Elegy*. Immediately after what is now the 26th stanza, the following lines were placed :

“ Him have we seen, the greenwood side along,  
While o’er the heath we hied, our labor done,  
Oft as the woodlark piped her farewell song,  
With wistful eyes pursue the setting sun.”

In the earlier editions the epitaph was preceded by the following beautiful stanza :

“ There scattered oft, the earliest of the year,  
By hands unseen, are showers of violets found ;  
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,  
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.”

Two years after the publication of the *Elegy*, Gray was suddenly called from Cambridge to the bedside of his dying mother. She rallied a little after his arrival, but died a few weeks later and was buried beside her sister in the churchyard at Stoke.

Mr. Gosse draws the conclusion from a little incident which occurred just before the death of Gray’s mother, in connection with a proof of one of Bentley’s illustrations for the *Elegy*, that she not only did not know anything of this masterpiece, but was not even aware that her son wrote poetry. This seems almost incredible when considered with relation to the story of Lady Cobham’s efforts to cultivate his acquaintance. Lady Cobham resided in the Manor House at Stoke, which we may see just through the trees to the right of the church, not a stone’s throw away. She had received a manuscript copy of the *Elegy*, through Horace Walpole, and had conceived a most intense desire to meet the author. No better evidence of Gray’s retiring disposition and modesty could be asked for, than the fact that Lady Cobham had no knowledge that the writer of the *Elegy* had for several years spent his summers in the same parish in which she resided. She was made aware of this by one Reverend Mr. Robert Pert, who was settled at Stoke, and who knew Gray. There was staying with Lady Cobham, at this time, a Lady Schaub, who knew Lady Brown, a friend of Gray’s. With this very roundabout line of connection, Lady Cobham dispatched Lady Schaub and a Miss Speed, a niece of hers, to call upon Gray. The poet was out on a stroll when they called. They asked Gray’s mother to say nothing of their call, but they



left a note in his study which read as follows : “ Lady Schaub’s compliments to Mr. Gray ; she is very sorry not to have found him at home, to tell him that Lady Brown is very well.” It seems highly improbable that such an incident could have occurred without any mention to Gray’s mother of his local fame as the author of the Elegy. This affair led to a fast friendship between Gray and Lady Cobham, which lasted until her death, nine years later. The poet had given us his version of the half-romantic, half-ludicrous commencement of this acquaintance in the poem, “ A LANG STORY,” the opening lines, which refer to the old manor house, being :

“ In Britain’s Isle, no matter where,  
An ancient pile of building stands.”

Gray’s most prolific period was between 1753 and 1755. The “ Ode on Vicissitude ” was commenced during this time. It was found in a fragmentary and incomplete condition after his death and finished by Mason. The second and eleventh stanzas of this poem are very beautiful :

“ New born flocks in rustic dance,  
Frisking ply their feeble feet ;  
Forgetful of their wintry trance,  
The birds his presence greet ;  
But chief, the skylark warbles high  
His trembling, thrilling ecstasy ;  
And, lessening from the dazzled sight,  
Melts into air and liquid light.”

“ Happier he, the peasant, far,  
From the pangs of passion free,  
That breathes the keen yet wholesome air  
Of rugged penury.  
He, when his morning task is done,  
Can slumber in the noontide sun ;  
And hie him home, at evening’s close,  
To sweet repast, and calm repose.”

The “ Pindaric Odes,” the least known but the most classical of his works, were written during the period just mentioned.

In the summer of 1755, he went to visit a friend in Hampshire, and afterward took a somewhat extended tour in the South of England. He returned from this trip, to Stoke, the last of July in very poor health. This was the beginning of a long period of failing health which lasted without any complete recovery, until his death, sixteen years later.

On the death of Colley Cibber, in 1757, he was offered the post of poet-laureate, which he declined in a characteristic letter. This gentle, modest, kindly-natured man could deal in terms of grimmest irony and keenest sarcasm when the occasion presented. Apropos of the letter from the Lord Chamberlain, conveying the desire of the government to confer this honor upon him, and offering to waive, in his case, the writing of annual odes, which had always been one of the duties of the poet-laureate, he writes to Mason :

“ Though I well know the bland, emollient, saponaceous qualities both of sack and silver, yet if any great man would say to me, ‘ I make you rat-catcher to his Majesty, with a salary of 300 pounds a year and two butts of the best Malaga ; and though it has been usual to catch a mouse or two for form’s sake, in public, once a year, yet to you, sir, we shall not stand upon these things.’ I cannot say I would jump at it ; nay, if they would drop the very name of the office, and call me sinecure to the King’s majesty, I should still feel a little awkward, and think everybody I saw smelt a rat about me. Nevertheless, I interest myself a little in the history of it, and rather wish somebody may accept it that will retrieve the credit of the thing, if it be retrievable, or ever had any credit.”

On another occasion, in replying to a friend who had expressed some surprise at the intellectual reputation of Lord Shaftesbury, he says :

“ You cannot conceive how Lord Shaftesbury came to be a philosopher in vogue ; I will tell you ; first, he was a lord ; secondly, he was as vain as any of his readers ; thirdly, men are very prone to believe what they do not understand ; fourthly, they will believe anything at all, provided they are under no obligations to believe it ; fifthly, they love to take a new road, even when that road leads nowhere ; sixthly, he was reckoned a fine writer, and seems always to mean more than he said. Would you have any more reasons ? An interval of above forty years has pretty well destroyed the charm. A dead lord ranks with commoners ; vanity is no longer interested in the matter, for a new road is become an old one.”

With his deep sincerity, large grasp, cultivated judgment, and fastidious taste, he was, as might be expected, impatient with all forms of pretention. On the opening of the British

Museum, Gray, having taken quarters in Southampton Row, near by, became a daily visitor and student at the new institution. He had for some time contemplated writing a History of English Poetry and probably most of his work here was with a view to this production.

The poet seems to have had his little romance, as I have already hinted, although so far as we know it was of such a mild character as not to have exerted any marked effect upon him. It was for several years believed he would marry the Miss Speed mentioned above as the niece of Lady Cobham. He spent considerable time in her company from the date of their meeting until the autumn of 1760. The following January she married a poor nobleman ten years her junior. She is said to have inspired the following solitary specimen of his love poetry :

“ With beauty, with pleasure surrounded, to languish —  
To weep without knowing the cause of my anguish ;  
To start from short slumbers and wish for the morning —  
To close my dull eyes when I see it returning ;  
Sighs, sudden and frequent, looks ever dejected —  
Words that steal from my tongue, by no meaning connected :  
Ah! say, fellow-swains, how these symptoms befell me?  
They smile, but reply not—Sure Delia will tell me!”

In the summer of 1769, Gray visited the English Lakes, and from this enchanted region he wrote some most exquisitely beautiful descriptive letters. This from the shore of Derwentwater :

“ In the evening walked alone down to the lake by the side of Crow Park, after sunset, and saw the solemn coloring of light draw on, the last gleam of sunshine fading away on the hilltops, the deep serene of the waters, and the long shadows of the mountains thrown across them, till they touched the nethermost shore. At distance heard the murmur of many waterfalls, not audible in the daytime. Wished for the moon, but she was dark to me and silent, hid in her vacant interlunar cave.”

It would be difficult to find a finer bit of nature painting than the following, written from the vale of Grasmere :

“ Just beyond Helen Crag opens one of the sweetest landscapes that art ever attempted to imitate. The bosom of the mountains, spreading here into a broad basin, discovers in the midst Grasmere Water ; its margin is hollowed into small bays and bold eminences, some of them rocks, some of soft turf that half conceal and vary the figure of the little lake they command. From the shore a low promontory pushes itself far into the water, and on it stands a white village, with the parish church rising in the midst of it ; hanging enclosures, corn fields, and meadows green as

emerald, with their trees, hedges, and cattle, fill up the whole space from the edge of the water. Just opposite to you is a large farmhouse at the bottom of a steep, smooth lawn embosomed in old woods, which climb half way up the mountain side, and discover above them a line of broken crags that crown the scene. Not a single red tile, no flaring gentleman's house, or garden walls, break in upon the repose of this little unsuspected paradise ; but all is peace, rusticity, and happy poverty in its neatest and most becoming attire."

Gray had contemplated a trip to Switzerland in the Summer of 1770, by invitation of one Bonstetten, a Cambridge student from the land of William Tell, for whom he had conceived a deep friendship. But he found his strength unequal to the effort. His health had been rapidly failing for some time, and in the Spring of 1771 he placed himself under the treatment of a physician for gout in his stomach.

Norton Nichols visited him about this time, just prior to his departure for a trip on the Continent. Gray exacted a promise from him not to call on Voltaire. He fully recognized the genius of the great Frenchman, but he believed him a dangerous enemy to Christianity, and Gray, although averse to any sort of religious display, was himself a sincere Christian. He probably had Voltaire in mind in writing the following "Sketch of His Own Character" found in his pocket after his death.

" Too poor for a bribe and too proud to importune,  
He had not the method of making a fortune ;  
Could love and could hate, so was thought somewhat odd ;  
*No very great wit, he believed in a God :*  
A post on a pension he did not desire,  
But left Church and State to Charles Townshend, and Squire."

Gray returned to Cambridge on the 22nd of July, in a very dejected condition of mind and body. On the evening of the 24th, while at dinner, he had a very violent attack of nausea, with spasms of the stomach. This was the beginning of the end. He was taken with convulsive fits a few days later and died quietly, shortly before midnight, on the 30th of July, 1771, in the fifty-fifth year of his age. His body was interred at Stoke, in the same vault containing the remains of his beloved mother.

Johnson, in his "Lives of the Poets," seems to accept the description of Gray's attainments and character contained in the letter written to Boswell, from the Rev. Mr. Temple, a rector of St. Gluvins, Cornwall. He says:





Stoke Pogis Churchyard.



“ Perhaps he was the most learned man in Europe. He was well acquainted with the elegant and profound parts of the sciences, and that not superficially but thoroughly. He knew every branch of history, both natural and civil ; had read all the original historians of England, France and Italy, and was a great antiquarian. Criticism, metaphysics, morals, politics, made a principal part of his study ; voyages and travels of all sorts were his favorite amusements ; and he had a fine taste in painting, prints, architecture and gardening. With such a fund of knowledge his conversation must have been equally entertaining and instructive. But he was also a good man, a man of virtue and humanity. There is no character without some speck, some imperfection, and I think the greatest defect in his was an affectation in delicacy, or rather effeminacy and visible fastidiousness or contempt and disdain of his inferiors in science. He also had, in some degree, that weakness which disgusted Voltaire so much in Mr. Congreve ; though he seemed to value others chiefly according to the progress they had made in knowledge, yet he could not bear to be considered himself merely as a man of letters ; and though without birth or fortune, or station, his desire was to be looked upon as a private independent gentleman, who read for his own amusement. Perhaps it may be said, what signifies so much knowledge when it produced so little ? Is it worth taking so much pains to leave no memorial but a few poems ? But let it be considered that Mr. Gray was, to others, at least innocently employed ; to himself certainly beneficially. His time passed agreeably ; he was every day making some new acquisition in science ; his mind was enlarged, his heart softened, his virtue strengthened ; the world and mankind were shown to him without a mask, and he was taught to consider everything as trifling and unworthy of the attention of a wise man, except the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of virtue, in that state wherein God hath placed him.”

This seems a somewhat inadequate summing up of the man, although, perhaps the “ pursuit of knowledge and the practice of virtue ” might be considered the motto for an ideal life. It is said that the offensive fastidiousness which the good rector mentions in his letter, was only exhibited towards those whose acquaintance he did not care to cultivate.

He made but few friends, but with these few he was a most charming companion. For the most part he lived a solitary life, in the sense that the most profound solitude is that of a deep and sincere nature which can find no adequate expression or satisfaction in the shallow trivialities of ordinary life.

His fame rests not upon his great scholarship, and would not, had he left far greater fruits of it than he has, but upon the noble, tender, solemn lines of the great lyric poem which has carried his name into many remote corners of the earth, where nothing more is known of THOMAS GRAY than that he was the author of the "ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD."

LONDON, 1890.

J. L. WILLIAMS.









"Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight."



THE Curfew tolls the knell of parting day ;  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea ;  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

Save that, from yonder ivy-mantled tower,  
The moping Owl does to the Moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.



" And drowsy myklinges till the distant folds."









" From yonder ivy-mantled tower. "

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care ;  
No children run to lisp their sire's return,  
Or climb his knees, the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield ;  
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke ;  
How jocund did they drive their team a-field !  
How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke !



"Their furrow of the gibbourn glebe has broke."









"How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke."

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
    Their homely joys, and destiny obscure ;  
Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,  
    The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
    And all that beauty, all that wealth, e'er gave,  
Await alike the inevitable hour ;—  
    The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud ! impute to these the fault,  
    If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise ;  
Where, through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,  
    The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn, or animated bust,  
    Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath ?  
Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust ?  
    Or Flattery soothe the dull, cold ear of Death ?





"Let not ambition mock their useful toil."



Perhaps, in this neglected spot, is laid  
    Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire ;  
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,  
    Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge, to their eyes, her ample page,  
    Rich with the spoils of Time, did ne'er unroll ;  
Chill Penury repressed their noble rage  
    And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem, of purest ray serene,  
    The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear ;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
    And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village Hampden, that, with dauntless breast,  
    The little tyrant of his fields withstood,—  
Some mute, inglorious Milton,—here may rest ;  
    Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.



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"Their homely joys and destiny obscure."





The applause of listening senates to command;  
The threats of pain and ruin to despise;  
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,  
And read their history in a nation's eyes,—

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone  
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;  
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind;

The struggling pangs of conscious Truth to hide;  
    To quench the blushes of ingenuous Shame;  
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride,  
    With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
    Their sober wishes never learned to stray;  
Along the cool, sequestered vale of life,  
    They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.



"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife."





Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect,  
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,  
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered Muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply ;  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,  
    This pleasing, anxious being e'er resigned ;  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
    Nor cast one longing, lingering look behind ?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies ;  
    Some pious drops the closing eye requires ;  
E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries ;  
    E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.





"Brushing with hasty steps the dew away."

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonored dead,  
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
If, 'chance, by lonely Contemplation led,  
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate;

Haply, some hoary-headed swain may say :  
“ Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn,  
Brushing, with hasty steps, the dews away,  
To meet the Sun upon the upland lawn.



“ There, at the foot of yonder nodding beech,  
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
His listless length, at noontide, would he stretch,  
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

“ Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,  
Mut’ring his wayward fancies, he would rove ;  
Now drooping, woeful, wan, like one forlorn,  
Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.



"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech."







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"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn."



“ One morn, I missed him on the 'customed hill,  
    Along the heath, and near his favorite tree ;  
Another came ; nor yet beside the rill,  
    Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood, was he ;

“ The next, with dirges due, in sad array,  
    Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.  
Approach and read—for thou canst read—the lay  
    Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.”

## THE EPITAPH.

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth,  
A youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown;  
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy marked him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere;  
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Misery all he had—a tear;  
He gained from Heaven—'twas all he wished—a friend.

No further seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode;  
Here they alike in trembling hope repose,—  
The bosom of his Father and his God.



## THE REJECTED VERSES.

Hark! how the sacred calm that breathes around  
    Bids every fierce, tumultuous passion cease;  
In still, small accents whispering from the ground  
    A grateful earnest of eternal peace.

Him have we seen the greenwood side along,  
    While o'er the heath we hied, our labor done,  
Oft as the woodlark piped her farewell song,  
    With wistful eyes pursue the setting sun.

There scattered oft, the earliest of the year,  
By hands unseen, are showers of violets found;  
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,  
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.





























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